DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 415 CS 216 245

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TITLE Self-Assessment for Writing Instructors: A Practical Guide to More Effective Written Commentary.
PUB DATE 1998-04-04
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Evaluation Methods; Heuristics; Higher Education; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Student Evaluation; *Teacher Response; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Guided Self Analysis System

ABSTRACT

Writing instructors must first examine the ways in which they are currently making written comments to become more effective in fostering improved student writing. Three heuristic rubrics form the basis for a guided self-assessment rubric for writing instructors. The first rubric is based on the work of Elaine O. Lees (1979) and involves instructors charting their comments. The second rubric is based on the work of Rick Straub (1996), in which comments are divided into those that exert firm control, moderate control, or mild control. The third rubric is based on a modified version of Paul Diederich's work (1974) in which shared criteria for assessing student writing are divided into five essential categories: focus, development and support, organization, mechanics, and audience awareness. These rubrics do not simply tell or show instructors how to make written commentary, they guide instructors in teaching themselves the most appropriate methods of making effective written comments. Through application of these rubrics and other guided self-assessment techniques, writing instructors can begin to realize the potential inherent in guided self-assessment. Three appendixes present charts and category criteria for each of the rubrics. (RS)

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ED 417 415

Sprinkle, Russ S. "Self-Assessment for Writing Instructors: A Practical Guide to More Effective Written Commentary." Address. Ideas, Historias, y Cuentos: Breaking with Precedent. Conference on College Composition and Communication. Palmer House, Chicago. 4 April 1998.

The title of my presentation today is "Self-Assessment for Writing Instructors: A Practical Guide to More Effective Written Commentary." But before I get into the main part of my presentation, I'd like to volunteer a bit of personal information that I hope will help introduce my topic. Last December I did something I had never done before. It was something I felt I needed to do mainly for health reasons. Last December I went on a diet for the first time in my life. I decided I needed to change my eating habits in order to feel better and live a healthier life. But rather than arbitrarily jumping into some fad weight loss program, I decided I would first take an inventory to see exactly what I was eating. In other words, I wanted to assess or, more accurately, self-assess my eating habits before deciding exactly how to make any modifications. So I carefully began to take note of all the different types of foods I was eating--some healthy, but most not so healthy.

To use another example, when I put myself on a strict financial budget several years ago, I first established a clear understanding of what were then my spending habits. But before I committed to a budget, I faithfully logged every dime I spent for about a month. Then, and only then, did I attempt to create a realistic budget for myself.

And finally, one last example. As I was planning my trip from Bowling Green, Ohio to Chicago, I first checked a detailed map of the area to locate my starting point. I needed to know exactly where I was according to a map in order to find my way to where I wanted to go. So by way of introduction, I hope these examples illustrate the main thrust of my presentation today. It involves helping us "find out where we are" regarding our written comments to student writers. And the way to begin, just as I did with my diet, my budget, and my trip to Chicago, is to self-assess--to examine what we are currently doing with our written comments before we attempt to change or modify them.

The need to take a closer look at our written commentary is evidenced by a comparison of two studies--one conducted by Nancy Sommers in 1982. The other, a study conducted by Joseph Moxley in 1992. In 1982, Sommers found that many of the teachers she interviewed for her study "had been trained in various prewriting techniques, in constructing assignments, and in evaluating papers for grades, but rarely in the process of reading a student text for meaning or in offering commentary to motivate revision" (153). Interestingly, Moxley reported similar results a full ten years later. Only 18% of the 419 writing instructors he surveyed in 1992 "received any academic training in response" (25). And an alarming 68% reported they had primarily learned to evaluate student papers "from personal experience" (25). If these figures accurately represent how writing instructors have been trained in written commentary, then statistics may be even less encouraging among WAC instructors.

This leads me to the premise of the project I am presenting here today, which is that in order to become more effective in fostering improved student writing, we must first examine the ways in which we are currently making written comments. Termed "guided self-assessment," my project is based on three heuristic rubrics adapted from the work of Elaine O. Lees, Rick Straub, and Paul Diederich, respectively.

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The first rubric I want to show you today is based on the work of Elaine O. Lees. In her 1979 article "Evaluating Student Writing," Lees divides modes of written commentary into two distinct categories: (1) those that foster student responsibility for revision (suggesting, questioning, and reminding) and (2) those that reflect teacher responsibility for revision (correcting, emoting, and describing). Current theory and common sense have demonstrated that students who revise their work generally produce better written products. So in order to better understand how our comments may or may not be encouraging revision, I've modified Lees's categories and organized a rubric that allows instructors to chart their comments (see Appendix A). The charting process is simple. It involves numbering a set of written comments that have been made on a student's draft or a collection of drafts and then placing an "x" in the appropriate category on the rubric.

The second rubric is based on the work of Rick Straub, one of the nation's leading researchers on written commentary. Part of Straub's work concerns the amount of control that our written comments exert over students' writing. In his research, Straub demonstrates that, although all comments exert some control over students' writing, those that exert a moderate amount of control are most preferred by students. Straub reports that students "did not like comments. . . that took control of their writing. . . [or] comments that were framed in highly directive modes. . . that pushed the teacher's views on the writer" (Students Reactions 103). Straub's work suggests that by exerting minimal or moderate control over students' texts, we enable them to retain ownership of their work, of their ideas, and of their unique writing processes. The model I've created based on Straub's work divides modes of commentary into three categories--those that exert firm control (corrections and commands) those that exert moderate control (qualified evaluations, advice, and suggestions), and those that exert mild control (questions and reader response) (see Appendix B). Again, by charting our written comments according to the process described above, these theory-based rubrics can enable us to see emerging patterns in our written comments and alternative options in responding to student writing.

The third rubric I'm presenting today is based on a modified version of Paul Diederich's work currently in use at Eastern Washington University (EWU). As part of their Writing Across the Curriculum Program, writing program administrators at EWU have condensed Diederich's model into four essential categories: (1) Focus (2) Development and Support (3) Organization, and (4) Mechanics. These are referred to at EWU as the "Shared Criteria for Assessing Student Writing." I've added a fifth category to this model that I call Audience Awareness or "Kairos" (the right thing at the right time in the right amount). The resulting rubric reflects how each of these categories refer to features of the writing situation: Content Features (focus and development and support), Textual Features (organization and mechanics), and Contextual Features (Kairos or audience awareness) (see Appendix C).

The Shared Criteria for Assessing Student Model model differs from both the Revision Responsibility rubric (Lees) and the Degrees of Control rubric (Straub) in that the latter rubrics are based on *modes* of written comments--that is, the way that the comments are phrased. The Shared Criteria model, however, is based on the *focus* of the

comment--that is, the area that writing instructors address when making written commentary, e.g., organization, mechanics, development and support, etc.

When used in tandem, these rubrics can provide multiple perspectives on strategies that instructors may be employing when making written commentary. They can (1) help instructors to analyze, evaluate, and improve their written commentary; (2) illuminate emerging patterns in instructors' written commentary; (3) help instructors establish clearer goals for written commentary; and (4) help better connect instructors' individual commenting strategies with current theories on written commentary.

But perhaps the most distinctive feature of these rubrics is that they do not simply *tell* instructors how to make written commentary, as do many of the articles appearing in current composition journals. Nor do they *show* instructors how to make written commentary--that is, they avoid identifying a particular comment as "good" in the Platonic sense. Rather, these heuristic rubrics guide instructors in *teaching themselves* the the most appropriate methods of making effective written comments based on a combination of current writing theory and their unique individual, classroom, and disciplinary contexts. These rubrics can be useful as WAC training tools, as part of graduate training courses for new writing instructors, and as part of development programs sponsored by writing program administrators.

I'd like to close with a quotation from Rick Straub. In a recent article on written commentary, he calls for all instructors of writing-enriched courses (within and without English departments) to carefully consider our commenting strategies in light of current pedagogical, rhetorical, and cognitive theories:

> All of us, it seems to me, would do well, then, to take a close, hard look at the comments we make, consider whether they are doing the kind of work we want them to do, and make whatever changes we can to make them work better. (The Concept of Control... 248)

Through the application of these heuristic rubrics and other guided self-assessment techniques, my hope is that we can begin to realize the potential inherent in the kind of self-assessment that Straub seems to be calling for.

Thank you.

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Appendix A
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Revision Responsibility

	Teacher Responsibility				Student Responsibility			
Comment Number	Alert	Emote	Describe		Suggest	Question	Assign	X
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Revision Responsibility
Category Criteria

Alerting: Comments or marks that alert students to mechanical errors. Minimal marking, correction symbols, and editing are included in this category.

Emoting: Comments that imply a shared humanity or that create a sense of identification with the student, e.g., "I agree with you here." "I never of thought of it that way before." "Interesting point!"

Describing: Comments that describe the rhetorical function of the text--that is, what the text is "doing," e.g., "This paragraph seems out of place here." "You seem to be repeating yourself in this section."

Suggesting: Comments that suggest editorial changes. "You might consider expanding this idea a bit more." "Perhaps this idea would be more appropriate in a later section of your essay."

Questioning: Comments that ask "real" (rather than rhetorical) questions, e.g., "What are the consequences of such a statement?" "How does this idea reflect or connect with your thesis?" "How might you refute a counter-argument for this?"

Reminding: Comments that connect textual features to prior class discussions or student conferences to enhance reinforcement, e.g., "Your punctuation pattern sheet covers this material." "The essay by Tom Wu we reviewed in class would be an excellent model for you to follow here."

Assigning: Comments that assign tasks related to revision--that is, formative feedback, e.g., "Add an example here." "Condense these two paragraphs for your next draft." "Amplify this concept." "Work on developing a stronger opening."

Based on the work of Elaine O. Lees--1979

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Appendix B
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Degrees of Control

Comment Number	Firm Control: Corrections	Firm Control: Commands	Moderate Control: Qualified Evaluations	Moderate Control: Advice Suggestions	Mild Control: Questions	Mild Control: Reader Responses
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Degrees of Control
Category Criteria

Corrections: Comments or marks that indicate mechanical errors. Minimal marking, correction symbols, and editing are included in this category.

Commands: Comments that tell the reader exactly what to do or write, e.g., "Explain a little more about the New Mexico program." "State your thesis up front rather than at the end of your essay."

Qualified Evaluations: Comments that use qualifiers to temper the authority of the teacher and imply less control, e.g., "This might come across to your audience as a bit antagonistic." "This seems a little too general and perhaps unrealistic."

Advice/Suggestions: Comments that suggest editorial changes, e.g., "At this point, you may want to make an outline of your major points and restructure your essay slightly to fit that outline." "My suggestion is to stick with the govt. as your audience, explain the Texas and New Mexico systems a little more and, finally, you may want to urge the govt. to enact similar programs."

Reader Response: Comments that reflect an understanding of the writer's purpose or emotional involvement in the text; or, comments that attempt to create identification with the writer, e.g., "You make some pretty strong and definite claims against Ebonics here." "I can tell you feel very strongly about this issue."

Questions: Comments that ask "real" (rather than rhetorical) questions, e.g., "Are you sure this is a true statement?" "How might you refute a counter-argument for this?"

Based on the work of Richard Straub--1995

Appendix C
Russ Sprinkle

			Shared Criteria				
	Content Features			Textual Features			Contextual Features
Comment Number	Focus	Development and Support		Organization	Mechanics		Kairos Audience Awareness
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Shared Criteria For Assessing Student Writing
Category Criteria

Focus: Comments or marks that address the essay's focus or adherence to a central point, e.g., "You seem to drift from your main point about the middle of the second page." "I like the topic you've chosen, but I suggest narrowing your focus a little more."

Development and Support: Comments that address the usage of supporting devices, such as statistics, quotations, examples, etc., e.g., "Can you provide a specific example here?" "Can you explain more about how the lottery works?" "Your main points seem unevenly developed."

Organization: Comments that address the essay's organization, e.g., "I suggest moving this paragraph closer to the beginning of your essay." "You might want to put this narrative at the beginning."

Mechanics: Comments, edits, minimal marks, or correction symbols that attend to textual features such as punctuation, grammar, spelling, capitalization, the format of the essay, etc., e.g., "Periods typically belong inside quotation marks." "Try using a semicolon here instead of a period."

Kairos/Audience Awareness: Comments that attend to the exigency, the purpose, or the rhetorical context of the writing, e.g., "This might come across as a bit antagonistic to your audience." "My suggestion is to stick with the govt. as your audience."

Based on the work of Paul Diederich (1974) and Eastern Washington University

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